

Principals as Leaders in a Culture of Change

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The more that large scale, sustainable educational reform becomes the agenda, the more that leadership becomes the key. In this article I will argue that ‘the principal as instructional leader’ has been a valuable, but too narrow a solution. Instead, the instructional focus must be embedded in a more comprehensive and fundamental set of characteristics which I call ‘the principal as leader in a culture of change’. I will also argue that to achieve the latter we must address the even deeper matter of ‘leadership and sustainability’.

The emphasis on the principal as instructional leader has been a valuable first step in increasing student learning. For example, Newmann, King and Youngs (2000) found that ‘school capacity’ is the critical variable in affecting instructional quality and corresponding student achievement. At the heart of school capacity was principal leadership that focussed on the development of teachers’ knowledge and skills, professional community, program coherence, and technical resources.

This same model has been extended to the work of entire districts in achieving large scale turnaround in literacy and numeracy. Some of the core strategies for developing the role of the principal as instructional leader are well described by Fink and Resnick (2001). They discuss five mutually reinforcing sets of strategic activities that they have used including: nested learning communities, principal institutes, leadership for instruction, peer learning and individual coaching. The effect is to develop large numbers of principals as instructional leaders, which in turn, serve to increase literacy and mathematics.

Despite these impressive results, they do not represent deep or lasting reforms. Indeed, one can improve literacy and numeracy scores in the short run, while the moral and working conditions

of teachers deteriorates over the mid to long run. To accomplish lasting reform we need fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and of the teaching profession itself. In brief, the role of the principal as instructional leader is too narrow a concept to carry the freight of the kinds of reforms that will create the schools we need for the future.

Principal as Leader in a Culture of Change

We are now beginning to discover that leaders who have deeper and more lasting impact provide more comprehensive leadership than focussing just on higher standards. Collins' (2001) study Good to Great examined 11 businesses that had a minimum of 15 years of sustained economic performance. Collins identified the Level 5 Executive Leader who "builds enduring greatness" in comparison to the Level 4 Effective Leader "who catalyses commitment to a compelling vision and higher performance standards."

The Hay group has been analysing leadership including the characteristics of highly effective principals. In Australia, for example, they identified thirteen characteristics across four domains: Driving School Improvement; Delivering Through People; Building Commitment; and Creating an Educational Vision (the latter included analytical thinking; and Big Picture thinking) (Hay Group, 1999).

In England, Hay Management Consultants (2000) compared 200 highly effective principals, with 200 senior executives in business. They found that both groups were equally impressive and that "the role of headteacher is stretching, by comparison, to business." The five domains of leadership they identified were: Teamwork and Developing Others; Drive and Confidence;

Vision and Accountability; Influencing Tactics and Politics; and Thinking Styles (conceptual and analytical).

Similarly, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) claim that emotionally intelligent leaders and emotionally intelligent organizations are essential in complex times. They identify 18 competencies around four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Such leaders are aware of their own emotional makeup, are sensitive and inspiring to others, and are able to deal with day-to-day problems as they work on more fundamental changes in the culture of the organization.

My point is that the principal of the future has to be much more attuned to the big picture, and much more sophisticated at conceptual thinking, and transforming the organization through people and teams. This, too, was my conclusion when I examined successful leadership for businesses and in school systems (Fullan, 2001). If the goal is sustainable change in the knowledge society, business and education leaders have increasingly more in common. This convergence requires a new mind and action set for leading complex change. Figure 1 depicts this framework. It consists of personal characteristics of energy/enthusiasm and hope, and five core components of leadership: moral purpose, understanding change, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing and coherence making. In the following paragraphs I describe the five components, illustrating each component in action with a reference to a hypothetical principal whom I will call 'Culture Change Principal or CCP.

Figure 1 Framework for Leadership



(From Fullan, 2001)

Moral purpose, defined broadly as we will see, is one of the five hallmarks of leading in a culture of change. In addition to the direct goal of making a difference in the lives of students, moral purpose plays a larger role in transforming and sustaining system change. Within the organization how leaders treat all others is also a component of moral purpose. At a larger level, moral purpose means acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the (social) environment. Let me be absolutely clear. The goal is system improvement (all schools in the district). This means that a school principal has to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools in the district as he or she is about his/her own school. This is so because sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward. This commitment to the social environment is precisely what the best principals must have

(incidentally, the strategies discussed by Fink and Resnick (2001) do indeed foster shared commitment among principals across the district).

Moral purpose means closing the gap between high performing schools and lower performing schools; high performing and lower performing students, by raising the level of achievement of all, while closing the gap. This is the only way for large scale, sustainable reform to occur — and it is moral purpose of the highest order.

Our hypothetical Cultural Change Principal would behave differently than most principals, even instructionally focussed ones. Yes, CCP would make it clear that student learning was paramount, and would monitor it explicitly with all teachers. But CCP would also be concerned with the bigger picture — how well are other schools in the district doing; what is the role of public schools in a democracy; is the gap between high performing and low performing students being reduced: (a) in my school (b) in our district (c) in the state and nation. CCP's moral purpose would also permeate how he/she treats others whether they be students, teachers, parents, and others. CCP would also be concerned about the development of other leaders in the school with a view to how prepared the school would be to go even further after CCP's tenure as leader. In short, a Cultural Change Principal would have explicit, deep and comprehensive moral purpose.

Second, it is essential for leaders to understand the change process. Moral purpose without an understanding of the change process is moral martyrdom. Having innovative ideas, and being good at the change process, is not the same thing. Indeed, the case can be made that those firmly committed to their own ideas are not necessarily good change agents because the latter involves

developing commitment with others who may not be so enamoured by the ideas. In Leading in a Culture of Change I suggested six guidelines for understanding the process of change: (1) the goal is not to innovate the most, but rather to innovate selectively with coherence; (2) it is not enough to have the best ideas, you must work through a process where others assess and come to find collective meaning and commitment to new ways; (3) appreciate early difficulties of trying something new — what I call the implementation dip. It is important to know, for example, that no matter how much pre-implementation preparation, the first six months or so of implementation will be bumpy; (4) redefine resistance as a potential positive force. Naysayers sometimes have good points, and they are crucial concerning the politics of implementation. This doesn't mean that you listen to naysayers endlessly, but that you look for ways to address their concerns; (5) reculturing is the name of the game. Much change is structural, and superficial. The change required is in the culture of what people value and how they work together to accomplish it; (6) never a checklist, always complexity. There is no step-by-step shortcut to transformation; it involves the hard day-to-day work of reculturing.

Our Cultural Change Principal has learned the difference between being an expert in a given content innovation and being an expert in managing the process of change. CCP would not make the mistake of assuming the best ideas would carry the day. CCP would provide opportunities for people to visit other sites using new ideas, would invite questions (even dissent), and would not expect the change process to go smoothly in the first few months of implementation. Such a principal would also push ahead expecting progress within a year having created the conditions for the process of change to yield results sooner than later.

Third, I found that the single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost. Thus leaders must be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups — especially with people different than themselves. This is why emotional intelligence is equal to or more important than having the best ideas. In complex times, emotional intelligence is a must.

The Cultural Change Principal knows, as the Hay Management Consultants (2000) found, that developing relationships and team building is the most difficult skill set of all for both business and educational leaders. CCP works on the full range of emotional intelligence domains, especially self-management of emotions, and empathy toward diverse others (Goleman et al, 2002). This is not just a matter of boosting achievement scores for next year, but rather laying the foundation for years two and beyond. Motivating and energizing a disaffected teacher, and forging relationships across otherwise disconnected teachers can have a profound multiplying effect on the overall climate of the organization. Building relationships is the resource that keeps on giving.

Fourth, the new work on knowledge creation and sharing is central to effective leadership. There are several deep insights here. One is that information (of which we have a glut) only becomes knowledge through a social process. This is why relationships and professional learning communities are essential. Another is that organizations must foster knowledge giving as well as knowledge seeking. We all endorse continuous learning when we say that individuals should constantly add to their knowledge base, but there will be little to add if people are not sharing. A norm of contributing one's knowledge to others is the key to continuous growth for all.

This is a good place to take up the relationships between the knowledge society and moral purpose. Hargreaves (in press) argues forcefully that the knowledge society can easily become amoral where selfishly seeking new ideas become the draw. For the knowledge society to thrive on a deep and continuous basis, it must have a moral compass. The knowledge society and moral purpose (social responsibility to others and the environment) need each other. It is easy to see why moral purpose will not go very far without knowledge, but I am also saying that the knowledge society literally will not sustain itself without moral qualities. This is not just a value statement; substantively, the technical quality of knowledge and its usability will be superficial unless it is accompanied by social and moral depth.

The CCP exquisitely appreciates that teaching is both an intellectual and moral profession. This principal constantly reminds teachers that they are engaged in practising, studying and refining the craft of teaching. Through the sharing of latest readings, action research, and inquiry groups, CCP models being the lead learner. Teachers working with a CCP know that they are engaged in the scientific discovery and refinement of the knowledge base of teaching. Knowledge creation and sharing fuels moral purpose in schools lead by CCPs.

Finally, since complex societies inherently generate overload, fragmentation and non-linearity — in complexity theory terms that is what they are perennially good at — effective leaders must always work on connectedness or coherence-making (Fullan, 1999, 2001). Coherence making is a complex and somewhat elusive concept. Principals not attuned to leading in a culture of change make the mistake of seeking external innovations, and taking on too many projects. CCPs on the other hands, focus on student learning as an integrator, and look for external ideas that can further the thinking and vision of the school. They realize that overload and fragmentation are

natural tendencies of complex systems. They appreciate the creative potential of diverse ideas, but they strive to focus energy and achieve greater alignment. But they also look to the future preferring to create a culture that has the capacity not to settle on the solution of the day.

The previous four capacities help forge coherence through the checks and balances embedded in their interaction. Leaders with deep moral purpose provide guidance, but they can also have blinders if their ideas are not challenged through the dynamics of change, the give and take of relationships, and the ideas generated by new knowledge. Coherence is part and parcel of complexity and can never be completely achieved. Leaders in a culture of change value and almost enjoy the tensions inherent in addressing hard to solve problems because that is where the greatest accomplishments lie. This clearly places the principal well beyond the role of instructional leader.

Leadership and Sustainability

Those of us working on the development of leadership have increasingly turned our attention to sustainability — the likelihood that the overall system can continuously regenerate itself in an ever-improving direction. Because little attention has been paid to sustainability and because the 1990s represented a decade of neglect of supporting, developing and nurturing new leaders, the dearth of leadership has reached crisis proportions. Many states, foundations, and other agencies have made leadership development their number one priority.

My colleague, Andy Hargreaves, and I have been focussing particularly on the relationship between leadership and sustainability which we see as the way to large scale reform. Here I discuss four components of sustainability: (1) leadership and the (social) environment; (2)

learning in context; (3) leaders at many levels and leadership succession; and (4) the development of the teaching profession. Here, in other words, I turn to the conditions — policies, programs, infrastructures — under which principals as leaders in a culture of change can be produced and sustained in large numbers.

Leadership and the (Social) Environment

The concept of sustainability was originally applied to concerns about the depletion of resources in the physical environment. Our concern is the depletion of resources in the social and moral environment (see also Hargreaves, in press). This is an abstract concept, so I want to be as practical as possible here. By the social/moral environment I include questions of ‘closing the gap’ of achievement between high and low performers; the development of all schools in the system; and ultimately, the link to the strength of democracy in society. Put directly, if individual leadership does not concern itself with the development of the social/moral environment (as well as the internal development of the school) not only will the system deteriorate but so will one’s own organization over time. There are strategies for cultivating such leadership which essentially involves focusing on the moral purpose of all leaders, while reinforcing it with interaction across leaders — interaction which monitors performance (including closing the gap of achievement) and engages in problem-solving activities therein.

Learning in Context

Attempting to recruit and reward good performance is helpful to the organization, but is not the main point. Providing good training is useful but that, too, is a limited strategy. Elmore (2000:25) makes a similar observation:

What's missing in this view [focusing on talented individuals] is any recognition that improvement is more a function of learning to do the right thing in the setting where you work (my emphasis).

Learning in context, for example, occurs when principals are members of intervisitation study teams in a district in which they examine real problems and their solutions as they evolve in their own systems. Learning out of context takes place when principals go to a workshop or conference. The latter can be valuable as an input to further development but it is not the kind of applied learning that really makes a difference.

Learning in the setting where you work, or learning in context, is the learning with the greatest payoff because it is more specific (literally applied to the situation) and because it is social (thereby developing shared and collective knowledge and commitments). Learning in context is developing leadership and improving the system as you go. This kind of learning is designed to simultaneously improve the organization and the (social/moral) context. Learning in context is related to sustainability because it improves the system in a way that establishes conditions conducive to continuous development. These conditions include: opportunities to learn from others on-the-job; the daily fostering of current and future leaders; the selective retention of good ideas and best practices; the explicit monitoring of performance, and the like.

Leaders at Many Levels/Leadership Succession

The organization cannot flourish (or at least not for long) by the actions of the top leader alone. The commitment necessary for sustainable improvement must be nurtured up close in the

dailiness of organizational behavior, and for that to happen there needs to be many leaders around us. There needs to be leaders at many levels. Learning in context helps to produce such leaders. Furthermore, for leaders to be able to deal with complex problems (what Heifetz (1994) calls Leadership Without Easy Answers) they need at least ten years of cumulative development on the job. Leadership for many, over time, accomplishes just that in a built-in way. In this sense, ultimately your leadership in a culture of sustained change will be judged as effective not by who you are as a leader but by what leadership you leave behind.

This brings us to leadership succession. As Hargreaves says “Nothing fails to succeed like succession.” Or the shorter, “Nothing fails like succession.” There have been massive numbers of studies of leadership, but little attention to succession. Succession is more likely if there are many leaders at many levels, but also must be addressed in its own right. Organizations at all levels must set their sights on continuous improvement, and for that they must nurture, cultivate, and appoint successive leaders who are moving in a sustained direction.

The good news for most of us is that charismatic leaders are a liability for sustained improvement. Collins’ (2001) compared 11 companies with long-term financial performance profiles (a minimum of 15 continuous years) with other companies that made short-term shifts from good to great, but failed to sustain their gains:

Larger-than-life, celebrity leaders who ride in from the outside are negatively correlated with taking a company from good to great. Ten of eleven good-to-great-CEOs came from inside the company, whereas the comparison companies tried outside CEOs six times more often (Collins, 2001:10, emphasis in original).

Leaders who built enduring greatness were not high profile, flashy performers, but rather were “individuals who blend extreme personal humility with intense professional will” (p. 21).

Sustainability depends on many leaders, and thus, the qualities of leadership must be attainable by many, not just a few.

The Teaching Profession

There is a growing shortage of teachers around the world, and the sustainability worry is not the massive exodus associated with demographics, but whether or not we can attract and retain a high quality teaching force. Heroic principals can help compensate for limits in the profession, but by definition such principals will be in the minority. More fundamentally, we will not have quality principals on any scale until we have quality teachers on a large scale, both for reasons of getting the job done, and in light of the fact that quality teachers (on a large scale) form the pool for appointing quality principals (on a large scale).

Once again, individualistic strategies (signing bonuses, pay hikes, etc) will not work, unless the conditions of work are conducive to continuous development and prideful accomplishment. This is decidedly not the case now, and until improving the working conditions of teachers is addressed we have no chance of accomplishing large scale, let alone sustainable, improvement.

In England and Wales, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2001) just completed a Teacher Workload Study for the government. Among other things, they found that principals and teachers work more intensive weeks (but not necessarily more intensive years) than other comparable managers and professionals. In any case, they conclude that if the government is to transform the teaching force that:

“an essential strand will be to reduce teacher workload, foster increased teacher ownership, and create the capacity to manage change in a sustainable way that can lay the foundation for improved school and pupil performance in the future
(PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2001:2)

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss what this will entail (there is a pilot project in England and Wales about to get underway to address these issues). My point is that principal leadership is an instrument of this transformation (of the working conditions of teachers), but more to the point of sustainability, the principalship is a beneficiary because we will only get quality principals across the board when we have quality teachers across the board.

In conclusion, the principal as instructional leader has taken us only so far in the quest for continuous improvement. We now must raise our sights and focus on principals as leaders in a culture of change and the associated conditions that will make this possible on a large scale, sustainable basis including the transformation of the teaching profession. This will require system wide efforts at the level of schools, communities and districts, as well as radically more enlightened policies and incentives at the level of the state. Sustainability depends on it. Never has there been a more precious time to tackle this agenda than the next five years.

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